

WSMA REPORTS

Washington State Medical Association

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Editor's Column: *Heartsounds* Should Be Read by All

It's time for another book review. I know this isn't supposed to be a bookworm corner, but the last book discussed was published in 1827 and the current book came out last year. I don't think one a century is too excessive.

Every now and then a book with real import for the medical profession appears in the lay list. Such a book is *Heartsounds* by Martha Weinman Lear, a writer for the *New York Times* whose husband, Hal, suffers a massive myocardial infarction. This book chronicles in painful—at times hour by hour—detail his gradual deterioration from the initial attack through bypass to his ultimate death after three years. If nothing else, the book would serve as an excellent primer in the management of cardiogenic shock and congestive heart failure. But it is far more than this. Hal is a beautiful example of what Faulkner describes as the ability of the human spirit not just to endure but to prevail.

What raises the book above the norm and gives it added significance for physicians is the fact that the patient is a doctor and would be expected to receive the best in medical care from his peers. Not so. He falls victim to the same treatment as any other patient, including an indifferent intern who refuses to come check an infiltrating IV that results in a gangrenous sloughing, and a confused nurse who waits for two hours until 8 a.m. rounds to report his fulminating pulmonary edema because the doctors get angry if she disturbs them earlier. On several occasions only his special knowledge saves him from potentially disastrous staff mistakes.

This is a study in chronic illness and how poorly many physicians handle it. Hal finds himself treated—as he on occasion has treated patients—with an unguarded thoughtless remark or inappropriate joke. And, when the outcome is hopeless, he experiences his physicians' tendency to distance themselves by avoiding phone calls and lengthening the time between appointments.

The need for compassion and caring is the bottom line message in this book. There are occasional bright episodes, but they only serve to point out that compassion may not be something that can be learned. Hal proposes, half in jest, a course for medical students in which the student is chronically ill for three months. There is something in this book for every physician, and I recommend it to all.

David Hopkins, M.D.